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Memphis, TN –August 15 2012

Scholarship Program Grows Quickly, Needs Volunteers

A scholarship program is changing the way Tennessee students plan for life after high school. An organization called tnAchieves works with public high school seniors across the state as they begin their transition to college.

tnAchieves provides a last-dollar, post-secondary scholarship to any public high school graduate in 27 counties, including Shelby County. This means tuition cost should no longer be an obstacle when a student is deciding to attend community college or a technical institution. While all public high school students are eligible for tnAchieves, the program focuses primarily on first generation, low income students.

In only two years, Memphis/Shelby Achieves, as it is known locally, has accepted 5,088 scholarship applications from students from Memphis City and Shelby County Schools. Last year, Memphis/Shelby Achieves provided support for 359 students beginning their post-secondary careers at Southwest Tennessee Community College or Tennessee College of Applied Technology at Memphis. Seventy-two percent of these students were the first in their family to attend college.

Currently, more than 700 students across Shelby County remain eligible to receive the scholarship from the Class of 2013. This represents a 95 percent growth from its first year.

The program does not have GPA or ACT requirements to participate. The universal acceptance policy allows tnAchieves to reach the student who lacks financial support via the state's lottery scholarship and/or other academic scholarships. This philosophy also ensures the program captures its target student, rather than serving as a supplemental program for students who planned to attend a post-secondary institution without its assistance.

Raising awareness of financial aid options and ultimately eliminating the funding barrier are obviously important; however, it is the mentoring component that sets tnAchieves apart from other programs. Each student is assigned a volunteer mentor who assists the student in eliminating the barriers associated with post-secondary access. tnAchieves mentors support the student through admission and financial aid paperwork, motivate the student to meet deadlines, and perhaps most importantly, encourage the student to reach his/her potential.

"This is a specialized kind of mentoring," says Roby Williams, President of the Black Business Association. "We're not talking about spending a great number of hours building lifelong relationships. Students receive focused advice from people who have had the experience of higher education. This is a

small time commitment which can make a big impact in the life of a student who is hesitant or nervous about pursuing a college education.”

As the program continues to grow, the need for volunteer mentors increases as well. Mentors spend an average of one hour per month assisting four or five students through the college-going process. Mentors answer questions from students and provide support that many may be missing at home. For a first generation college attendee’s family, this process is new and can be very intimidating. The mentor encourages the student through post-secondary obstacles and serves as a trusted resource. The financial aid is important for the students, but it is the mentoring that allows the tnAchieves program and its students to be successful.

Memphis/Shelby Achieves expects even more students in the coming year. The mentoring component will be more important than ever as the program is projecting to accept nearly 3,500 scholarship applications from the Class of 2014 by October. This means 400 additional volunteers are needed to support the upcoming senior class.

Mentors come from all walks of life with previous participants including young professionals, successful business leaders, retirees and community activists among others. The only criterion is that the individual has a desire to help students succeed. Current tnAchieves mentor Jan Lyons had this to say about her experience: “I believe in the tnAchieves goal and decided to help. I have really seen with one of the girls that she and her mother were unsure of how college works. She just needed someone to provide a little prodding to make it through the process.”

One student who will begin classes at Southwest Tennessee Community College this fall wrote to the program, “I really want to thank you for offering me and the others this opportunity to become successful in our lives. This time last year I had no intentions of attending college, but my mentor gave me hope. You are really a blessing in my life and may God send MANY blessings your way. THANK YOU FOR CHANGING MY LIFE... p.s. Thanks for helping make my momma proud of me.”

On Thursday, September 5, tnAchieves is hosting an information session at Holiday Inn at Wolfchase from 5:30-7:30pm in the Kemmons Wilson room. If you or anyone you know would like to hear more, please join tnAchieves staff, current mentors and students, and other interested parties at this informal event.

By 2014, tnAchieves will have funded nearly \$8.9 million in last dollar scholarships. The program raises \$2.5 million annually in private donations.

For more information on the program please visit www.tnachieves.org or contact Kaci Murley, Director of Post-Secondary Success, at 901-258-2177 or kaci@tnachieves.org.